DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 277 989 CS 008 640

AUTHOR Kaiser, Robert A.; Hawes, Kathryn
TITLE College Preparation for the Underprepared High School Student.
PUB DATE Jan 87
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cognitive Development; *College Preparation; *Developmental Studies Programs; *Educationally Disadvantaged; Higher Education; High Risk Students; Instructional Effectiveness; Learning Strategies; Reading Comprehension; *Reading Improvement; Reading Processes; *Reading Skills; Reading Strategies; *Remedial Reading; Tutorial Programs; Underachievement
IDENTIFIERS *Remedial Intervention

ABSTRACT

College-bound students who score poorly on the American College Test (ACT) exam (16 or below) are usually required to take an examination that measures the ability to read and interpret college level material since this ability is a significant variable in the prediction of academic success. Many of these underprepared students need specific help with vocabulary, decoding, and study skills. A program in use at Memphis State University begins at the literal level and moves toward higher levels of thinking and reasoning, using both "top-down" (meaning comes from concepts already in the mind of the reader) and "bottom-up" (meaning flows from the printed page and is recoded) concepts of reading. Diagnostic testing first determines whether students are placed in a remedial (lower) or a developmental class, where each non-credit course is organized around a set of instructional objectives and taught using a specific skills instructional model. The most fundamental need is for more instructional time. Instructors have found that many underprepared students function at a literal thinking level and are unfamiliar with higher thinking levels and/or abstract thinking. In an additional lab period, tutors teach specific skill lessons and extend the classroom instruction. Plans for evaluation of the program are in place, and data are now being collected. Student response to the program has been encouraging so far. (NKA)

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COLLEGE PREPARATION FOR THE UNDERPREPARED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

Robert A. Kaiser Ed.D
Kathryn Hawes Ph.D

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January, 1987

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COLLEGE PREPARATION FOR THE UNDERPREPARED HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

Academically underprepared high school students face a new problem as they attempt to enroll in college today. Some students entering college, after taking the American College Test (ACT) or the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), find their paths toward graduation restricted because college administrators have implemented additional requirements for those who score poorly on their college entrance examinations. These examinations measure the ability to read and interpret college level material. Research (Anastasi, 1976) reveals that this ability is a significant variable in the prediction of academic success. Students who score poorly on this exam (16 or below on the ACT) usually experience academic difficulty, fail and drop out of college before their scheduled graduation dates (Buros, 1978).

Higher education leaders in the state of Tennessee have implemented an intensive state-wide attack on deficits in reading, writing, math and reasoning (study skills). The new college program evolved from years of growing concern and vigorous study, and all public higher education institutions in the state of Tennessee are involved with these areas of remediation. This report briefly describes what one Tennessee university is doing with the reading and study skills component.

THE PHILOSOPHY

Models of reading that are currently in use stress that cues to meaning come from the background of the reader, the printed page or a combination of both. Those who stress the importance of background information claim that meaning comes from concepts already in the mind of the reader. Print driven theorists claim that meaning flows from the printed page and that reading involves a "recoding" of print. These two approaches to reading have been defined as "Top-down" (concept driven) and "Bottom-up" (print driven).

At the college level it is silly to suggest an either/or theoretical position. The demands of college reading require the top down approach because college readers need background information in subject areas. This approach alone is unrealistic because many college students need specific help with vocabulary, decoding and study skills. What is required at the college level is an approach that starts at the literal level and moves toward higher levels of thinking and reasoning. Classes begin with a practical approach of teaching vocabulary, comprehension and study skills in what appears to be a separate skills approach. However, instructors constantly remind students that understanding and meaning come as a "whole" and good readers should be able to use the structure or organizational pattern of written material to retain meaningful concepts or ideas. Advanced organizers and other

devices that emphasize whole-part-whole learning are used to emphasize this type of reading. Therefore, college instructors work with both top-down and bottom-up concepts of reading and the ultimate approach accounts for both holistic and specific skills theory.

TESTING

The Department of Developmental Studies has been established at the university and is responsible for the administration of remedial and developmental classes. Underprepared students (scoring below 16 on the ACT) are referred to the department for further testing. Diagnostic testing is initiated using the Academic Assessment Placement Program (AAPP) which is a part of the State Board of Regents program that tests for readiness of college level courses. This testing determines whether students are placed in a remedial or a developmental class. Remedial classes reflect a high school performance level that is the minimum required for graduation. Developmental classes reflect a level of performance that is above the minimum requirement for high school graduation, but not sufficiently high to insure success in college. It is estimated that these scores range from about the ninth to twelfth grade levels.

Multiple sections of four remedial and developmental courses are scheduled throughout the academic school year and summer. These courses produce no credit toward graduation and they do not count in the calculation of a

student's grade point average. The courses were designed by faculty members after a year of intensive study. Each course is organized around a set of instructional objectives and taught using a specific skills instructional model.

INSTRUCTIONAL PROBLEMS

In recent research, Nolte and Singer (1985) found that direct instruction produced betters readers. At about the same time, Dolores Durkin (1978,1983) reported that direct instruction seldom appeared during her classroom observations. In a survey of instructional materials for teaching reading Durkin (1983) also found that activities for drill and practice outnumbered the activities designed to teach specific reading skills. These findings, along with the findings of Pearson and Gallagher (1983) indicate a need for more instruction in comprehension, especially for poor readers as they prepare for college.

There are two questions facing college educators who work with underprepared students. The first question is concerned with the level of skill required for a measure of academic success. The second question is concerned with learning time. Can college instructors teach the skills required for academic success in the limited time they have available? Table 1 illustrates the enrollment figures for remedial and developmental classes for the fall semesters of 1985 and 1986. These figures verify the magnitude of the

instructional problem for one university and show how increases in enrollment compound the problem.

INSERT TABLE 1

The first year of operation has brought the question of skill development to the surface. Instructors have found that many underprepared students function with a literal level of thinking and are unfamiliar with higher levels of thought that require abstract thinking. For example, students do extensive work in programmed vocabulary books. They learn vocabulary using a variety of direct instructional strategies like synonyms, antonyms or the multiple meanings of words. For most students, meaningful relationships are learned on what appears to be a literal level. Instructors have discovered that the broader or more subtle relationships do not always follow. One student wrote, "My father "terminated" the rose bushes." Technically, the father probably did "terminate" the rose bushes, but the instructor found it difficult and time consuming to explain that "destroyed" would have been a more appropriate word. Through experiences such as these, instructors have emphasized the need for more instructional time. They report that the discussion of word choice often requires a change in student attitude and outlook. As class size increases with enrollment, this task has become more and more difficult.

An additional amount of instructional time is scheduled for each student through the registration process. Every student eligible for a reading or study skills class is scheduled into an additional one-hour (per week) instructional lab. The time spent in this lab is devoted to instruction and is not reserved for drill and practice activities alone. Tutors teach specific skill lessons and extend the instruction of the classroom. The final grade in each course is determined, in part, by the quality of the work done in the labs. Attendance is also required. Throughout a semester, a student will spend 60 contact hours with instructors. This increase in instructional time provides more opportunity for improvement.

The second question concerned with the level of skill attainment has not been answered, nor can it be with the present amount of information. Current regulations allow students to move into regular college classrooms once they have successfully completed the developmental studies classes to which they have been assigned. Any student with a grade of C or better is assumed to have achieved a level of skill development that will allow successful completion of college academic requirements.

CONCLUSIONS

It is too early to determine the impact of the program on student performance in the college classroom. However, plans for evaluation are in place. Data which reflects

student retention in college, has been gathered for the first year of program operation. These data will provide a profile of program effectiveness comparing students enrolled in developmental studies classes and a comparable group of non-developmental studies students. As students complete their college educations, additional data will be gathered that goes beyond the simple retention in college figures. Hopefully, other data like grade point averages, college and department enrollment figures and graduation rates will clarify the value of the developmental studies program for underprepared college students.

Student response to date has been encouraging. One student announced that she used a multiple choice test taking strategy to get an A on her first test. An athlete confessed that he was taking notes in class,"just like you taught me to." Another student reported that she felt confident asking the history professor why and how questions that clarified and analyzed what she had read in the textbook. These and other responses are encouraging. With time, continued effort and appropriate attitude the underprepared student may face a far more optimistic future.

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Table 1

Remedial and Developmental Enrollment

for Reading and Study Skills Classes

Fall of 1985 and 1986

		1985	1986	Inc.	Pcnt
Remedial Study Skills	ASDS 0730	53	58	5	9
Remedial Reading	ASDS 0740	66	92	26	39
Dev. Study Skills	ASDS 0830	67	98	31	46
Dev. Reading	ASDS 0840	77	188	111	144
Total Remedial		119	150	31	26
Total Developmental		144	286	142	99
Total Study Skills		120	156	36	30
Total Reading		143	280	137	96